



## George Lucas: The Stinky Kid Hits the Big Time

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STEPHEN FARBER

## George Lucas:

### *The Stinky Kid Hits the Big Time*

George Lucas's *American Graffiti* is the surprise blockbuster of the year. Made for \$750,000, it has already earned over \$21 million; Universal is predicting that it may even outgross *Airport*. When he first conceived the film, Lucas could not have guessed that it would be released at the height of the nostalgia boom.

Although actually set in 1962, *American Graffiti* is the quintessential fifties nostalgia movie—a comprehensive recreation of the world of sock hops, drag races, cherry cokes, and Eisenhower complacency. The remarkable thing, however, is that the film recaptures the past without sentimentalizing it. A comedy with unexpected resonance, *American Graffiti* is neither a glorification nor a mockery of the period; it summons up the deeply conflicting feelings that we all have when contemplating our own youth and the primal experience of leaving home.

Dressed like one of the characters in the movie—Ivy League shirt and T-shirts, chinos, sneakers, and white sox—George Lucas could have stepped out of a time capsule; his beard is the only incongruous touch, a hint that he combines some of the irreverence of the sixties with the square earnestness of the fifties. Either way Lucas has little in common with most of Hollywood's chic superstar directors. In fact, he lives a long way from the studios—just north of San Francisco, in San Anselmo, in a spacious, beautifully secluded house that may remind him of the farm he grew up on.

*American Graffiti* is probably as close to an autobiographical film as a studio-financed Hollywood product will ever be. Lucas, like his char-

acters, grew up in Modesto, California, and graduated from high school in 1962; he spent most of his teenage years on the main drag, cruising. He says, "In a way the film was made so my father won't think those were wasted years. I can say I was doing research, though I didn't know it at the time." Most of the incidents in the film "are things that I actually experienced in one way or another. They've also been fantasized, as they should be in a movie. They aren't really the way they were but the way they should have been." For example, there is a hilarious scene in which the hero demolishes a police car. "Some friends of mine did that one Hallowe'en night," Lucas recalls, "but all that really happened was that the car drove off and went clunk. It wasn't so spectacular. It just doesn't happen that way in real life."

The movie follows four main characters: Steve, the superstraight class president dating the head cheerleader; John, the dragstrip champion who models himself on James Dean and drives the meanest deuce coupe in the valley; Terry, the dumb, creepy kid who only drives a Vespa but finally gets a chance to play the stud; and Curt, the most sensitive and introspective of the group, who chases a mysterious blonde in a white T-bird, and reluctantly boards a plane out of town in the morning—the only one of the four to break free. Lucas says he is, in a sense, a composite of all four characters: "I started out when I was young as Terry the Toad, and I think everybody sort of starts out as Terry the Toad. And I went from that to being John; I had a hot car, and I raced around a lot. Finally I got into a very bad accident and almost got

*Haskell Wexler  
and  
George Lucas  
during  
the shooting  
of  
AMERICAN  
GRAFFITI*



myself killed, and I spent a lot of time in the hospital. While I was in the hospital, I became much more academic-minded. I had been working as a mechanic, and I decided to give up cars and go to junior college, try to get my grades back. So for the next two years, while I was at junior college, I more or less was Curt. I was thinking about leaving town, and I had a lot more perspective on things."

It was his car accident that eventually led Lucas into film-making. Unlike many of today's young directors, he had no special passion for movies as a child. "Modesto was a small town, and there were only a couple of theaters. When I went to the movies, I really didn't pay much attention. I was usually going to look for girls or goof off." However, he had always been interested in graphic arts, and after his accident, he began working in photography—taking stills of sports cars. By chance he met the superb cinematographer (and director of *Medium Cool*) Haskell Wexler, who is a sports car enthusiast himself. Lucas happened to be working

for the mechanic hired to build one of Wexler's race cars, and they became friendly.

The encouragement of Wexler and his own growing interest in photography brought Lucas to the University of Southern California's film school. "When I finally decided that I was going to be a film-maker," Lucas remembers, "all my friends thought I was crazy. I lost a lot of face because for hot rodders the idea of going into film was really a goofy idea. And that was in the early sixties. Nobody went into film at that time. At USC the girls from the dorms all gave a wide berth to film students because they were supposed to be weird."

For the first time he began seeing movies compulsively. "In a way movies replaced my love for cars. Since I was about 12 or 13 I had had this intense love relationship with cars and motorcycles; it was really all-consuming. After my accident, I knew I couldn't continue with that, and I was sort of floundering for something. And so when I finally discovered film, I really fell madly in love with it, ate it and slept

it 24 hours a day. There was no going back after that."

Since then his obsessive devotion to movies and his fierce, sometimes dogged determination have kept him going even through the most difficult waiting periods. "When I got to film school, the other students said, 'You really can't make movies here. They don't give you enough film, they don't let you keep the camera for very long.' Well, I made eight films at USC, ranging from one minute to 25 minutes. It was difficult, and there were lots of barriers, but it wasn't impossible. I came up against the same discouragement when I left film school: 'You'll never get into the industry. Nobody ever does.' But, you know, I did it because I didn't believe what they said. You just have to be stubborn and bull-headed, and move forward no matter what you're up against."

Lucas managed to find work as a grip, then as cameraman and editor. A futuristic short he made at USC won the National Student Film award and a lot of attention; his first feature was an extension of that short. *THX-1138*, which made very inventive use of existing technology and architecture to create a chilling future world, came and went quickly. Although it found a cult following, it did very little for Lucas's reputation in the industry. When he developed the script for *American Graffiti*—before the fifties nostalgia craze was in full swing—he submitted it to a lot of unsympathetic readers. He wrote the screenplay for United Artists, but they considered the project too risky and dropped it. He spent another year hawking the screenplay to every studio in town before Universal finally agreed to gamble on it.

Despite all the rejections during that period, Lucas stubbornly refused to abandon the project. "We were in dire financial straits, but I spent a year of my life trying to get that film off the ground. I was offered about three other pictures during that time. They all turned out to be duds. One of them was released at the same time as *Graffiti*—it's called *Lady Ice*. I turned that down at the bleakest point, when I was in debt to my parents, in debt to Francis Coppola, in debt to my agent; I was so far in debt I thought I'd never

get out. Everybody in Hollywood had turned down *American Graffiti*. Universal had already turned it down once. And they offered me \$75,000 to do *Lady Ice*, which is more money than I'd made in my entire life. And I said no. I said, 'By God, I've got a movie here, and I'm going to get it made somehow.' And I did."

The deciding factor was the commitment of Francis Ford Coppola as producer. At the time that Universal was debating whether or not to make the movie, *The Godfather* was released, and one executive suggested to Lucas and his producer Gary Kurtz that if they could involve Coppola on *American Graffiti*, that might swing the studio. His name finally clinched the deal.

Lucas can thank Coppola for many of his lucky breaks over the last several years. The two met approximately six years ago, when Lucas was on a six-month fellowship at Warner Brothers, and Coppola was shooting *Finian's Rainbow* on the lot. Lucas was assigned to observe Coppola work, and they immediately struck up a friendship. "We were like the only two people on the set who were under 50," Lucas recalls, "and we were also the only two people on the set who had beards." Lucas then worked as Coppola's assistant on *The Rain People*, and Coppola was able to get Lucas his deal to direct *THX-1138* for Warners.

Their working relationship is an unusual one. Lucas says, "Francis is involved on all my pictures, and I'm involved on all his pictures. We more or less work together as collaborators. What we do is look at each other's scripts, look at the casting, then at the dailies, at the rough cut and the fine cut, and make suggestions. We can bounce ideas off each other because we're totally different. I'm more graphics-film-making-editing oriented; and he's more writing and acting oriented. So we complement each other, and we trust each other. Half the time he says I'm full of shit, and half the time I say he's full of shit. It's not like a producer telling you that you *have* to do something. Francis will say, 'Cut that scene out, it doesn't work at all.' And I may say, 'No, you're crazy. That's my favorite scene. I love it.' And he'll say, 'Okay, what do I care? You're an idiot anyway.' Actually, he calls me

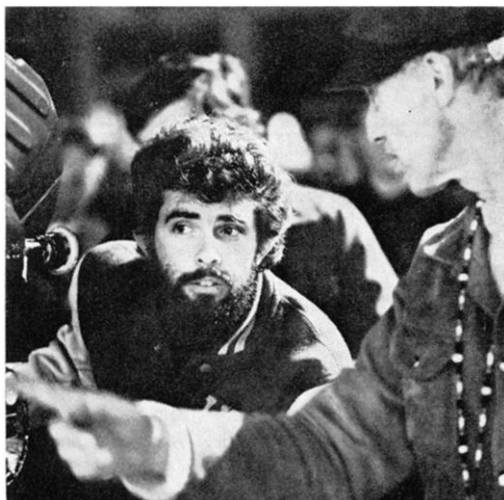
## GEORGE LUCAS

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a stinky kid. He says, 'You're a stinky kid, do what you want.' And I say the same thing to him. It works very well, because you really need somebody to test ideas on. And you get a piece of expert advice that you value."

Coppola and Lucas once hoped to set up an alternate film studio in San Francisco, where a group of maverick directors could work in a congenial, stimulating, noncompetitive atmosphere. They formed American Zoetrope in 1969. Encouraged by the success of *Easy Rider*, Warners agreed to back a whole series of films under Coppola's sponsorship. A few months later the "youth market" vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, and Warners pulled out of Zoetrope. Lucas recalls, "Francis was developing about seven screenplays—they were all interesting, adventurous scripts. But then Warner Brothers decided not to finance any more youth-oriented, adventurous, crazy movies. They went back to hard-core entertainment films. For them it was a good decision because they made a lot of money on that decision. But they sold us completely down the river."

Zoetrope still exists as a facility—and rents out its equipment to other film-makers—but not as a full-fledged studio. Nevertheless, Lucas believes that an alternate film community may still emerge in San Francisco. "Slowly but surely, a film community is being developed here. Michael Ritchie lives up here now, John Korty lives up here, I live up here, Francis lives up here. They are all close friends of mine, and we are continuing to make movies up here. We sort of support each other. My wife worked as an editor on *The Candidate*, and she's also worked for John Korty to get us through these little tough spots between movies. I hired Michael's wife on my picture. Just recently Phil Kaufman (*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*) moved up here, and a couple more of my friends are thinking seriously about moving here. So there is a community here, a very small one, and we all exchange ideas. It's not something you can create overnight. You have to get the environment right for it, and then let it grow very slowly. Unfortunately, we have a lot of problems with the unions up here, but we're surviving in spite



George Lucas

of it all. At certain times it's a drag to be so far from LA, but I definitely want to stay here."

Over just two movies Lucas's artistic development has been remarkable. *THX-1138* was a dazzling technical achievement; it revealed Lucas's control of all the resources of film—sound as well as image. Unfortunately, it also exhibited the most common failings of the science-fiction genre: the ideas (drawn from Orwell and Huxley) were rather stale, and the whole movie was cold and arid; the zombie characters could not really stir our sympathy. *American Graffiti* has the same technical flair, but Lucas's work with the actors reveals a new talent; this film has a depth of feeling missing from *THX-1138*. Lucas claims that he wanted to surprise his critics with his new movie: "After I finished *THX*, I was considered a cold, weird director, a science-fiction sort of guy who carried a calculator. And I'm not like that at all. So I thought, maybe I'll do something exactly the opposite. If they want warm human comedy, I'll give them one, just to show that I can do it. *THX* is very much the way that I am as a film-maker. *American Graffiti* is very much the way I am as a person—two different worlds really."

Nevertheless, Lucas is quick to call attention to the themes that the two films share. *THX* concerns one man's escape from the monolithic technological society. At the end the rebellious hero THX emerges from the underground prison, into the sun; it is an ambiguous conclusion, both liberating and a little frightening. *Ameri-*

*can Graffiti* also ends with one of the teenage boys breaking out of his cocoon, leaving home and escaping the enclosed, insulated world of the fifties. And he has the same mixed feelings that THX experienced on his escape—exhilaration at the new sense of possibilities, a pang of regret on leaving the safety of the familiar world. Lucas says, “I’ve always been interested in that theme of leaving an environment or facing change, and how kids do it. When I was 18 or 19, I didn’t know what I was going to do with my life. Where was I going to go, now that I was more or less free? What was I going to become? You can do anything you want at that age. And the kids who don’t believe that are wrong. Both *THX* and *American Graffiti* are saying the same thing, that you don’t *have* to do anything; it still is a free country.”

Beyond the obvious autobiographical impulses in *American Graffiti*, Lucas says the film reflects his interest in sociology and anthropology: “When I was in junior college, my primary major was in social sciences. I’m very interested in America and why it is what it is. I was always fascinated by the cultural phenomenon of cruising, that whole teenage mating ritual. It’s really more interesting than primitive Africa or ancient New Guinea—and much, much weirder.”

The American obsession with the car is intensified in California. The kids in Modesto still cruise, and they still cruise in Petaluma, where much of *American Graffiti* was actually shot—Modesto having changed too much in just ten years. For that matter, Lucas points out, “They still cruise in Los Angeles, and it’s bigger than it used to be. Van Nuys Boulevard is a big cruise street. We went down there one Wednesday night, which they call Club Night, and it was just bumper-to-bumper cars. There must have been 10,000 kids down there. It was insane. I really loved it. I sat on my car hood all night and watched. The cars are all different now. Vans are the big thing. Everybody’s got a van, and you see all these weird, decorated cars. Cruising is still a main thread in American culture.”

Lucas’s interest in early rock music is another strong influence on the movie. Excerpts from

the radio—41 pop songs and fragments of Wolfman Jack’s monologue—accompany most of the action in the film. “I have a giant rock and roll record collection—78s and 45s,” Lucas reports. “Mainly old rock, pre-Beatles, though I love the Beatles. I was always very interested in the relationship between teenagers and radio, and when I was at USC, I made a documentary about a disc jockey. The idea behind it was radio as fantasy. For teenagers the person closest to them is a fantasy character. That’s the disc jockey. It’s like younger kids who have make-believe friends. A lot of teenagers have a make-believe friend in a disc jockey, but he’s much more real because he talks to them, he jokes around. Especially a really excellent disc jockey like Wolfman Jack. He’s part of the family. You listen to him every day, you’re very close to him, you share your most intimate moments with him.”

Lucas remembers listening to Wolfman Jack when he was growing up in Modesto in the late fifties and early sixties. “When we were cruising, we could get Wolfman Jack from Tijuana. He was a really mystical character, I’ll tell you. He was wild, he had these crazy phone calls, and he drifted out of nowhere. And it was an outlaw station. He was an outlaw, which of course made him extremely attractive to kids.”

The 41 songs in *American Graffiti* were actually written into the script. When it came to editing the film, Lucas found that some songs he wanted to use were either unavailable or too expensive, so he had to make substitutions and shift some songs around. Even so, he spent \$80,000 purchasing music rights, probably a record sum. “Walter Murch did the sound montages, and the amazing thing we found was that we could take almost any song and put it on almost any scene and it would work. You’d put a song down on one scene, and you’d find all kinds of parallels. And you could take another song and put it down there, and it would still seem as if the song had been written for that scene. All good rock and roll is classic teenage stuff, and all the scenes were such classic teenage scenes that they just sort of meshed, no matter how you threw them together. Some-

times even the words were identical. The most incredible example—and it was completely accidental—is in the scene where Steve and Laurie are dancing to ‘Smoke Gets in Your Eyes’ at the sock hop, and at the exact moment where the song is saying, ‘Tears I cannot hide,’ she backs off, and he sees that she’s crying.

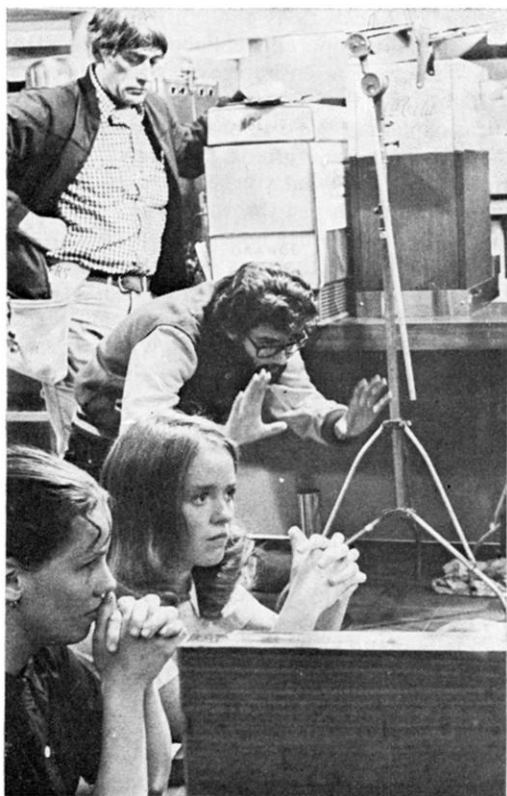
“In a way you could trace the film through the Beach Boys, because the Beach Boys were the only rock group who actually chronicled an era. We discovered that you could almost make a whole Beach Boys album out of just *American Graffiti* songs. The blonde in the T-bird is from ‘Fun, Fun, Fun.’ ‘I Get Around’ is about cruising. You listen to the words of that and think of the movie. It wasn’t intentional, but they were chronicling that period so true that when we came back and redid my childhood the way I remembered it, their songs blend right into the movie. ‘Little Deuce Coupe’ could be about John and his deuce coupe. ‘All Summer Long’—which is sort of the theme song of the film—talks about T-shirts and spilling Coke on your blouse. ‘409’ is about dragging. ‘California Girls.’ I always loved the Beach Boys because when we’d cruise, we’d listen to their songs, and it was as if the song was about *us* and what we were doing. It wasn’t just another song about being in love. They got more specific.”

Although *American Graffiti* is a highly personal film, it was not a one-man show, and Lucas is quick to point out the important contributions of his collaborators. His co-writers, Willard Huyck (whom he met at USC) and Huyck’s wife Gloria Katz (a graduate of the rival film school at UCLA), worked with Lucas on the original treatment and on the final draft screenplay. “I’m really quite lazy and I hate to write,” Lucas confesses. “Bill and Gloria added a lot of very witty dialogue and wrote all the scenes that I couldn’t find my way to write. In my script, the characters of Steve and Laurie didn’t work at all, and I couldn’t make them work. The Huycks saved that. And they brought a lot of character to the hoods. My screenplay was much more realistic, and they added a lot more humor and fantasy to it, and improved it a great deal.” (The Huycks have just sold their own original

screenplay *Lucky Lady* to 20th Century-Fox.)

An equally important collaborator was Haskell Wexler. The entire movie was to be shot at night, and that created unusual difficulties. Lucas explains, “We’d start at 9:00 at night and end at 5:00 in the morning. In a regular movie, if you don’t get what you’re supposed to shoot one day, you can just throw up a few arc lights and shoot for another hour. On *Graffiti*, when the sun came up, that was the end of the ballgame. We couldn’t get one more shot. It was very hard on the crew. Nobody gets any sleep, so everybody’s cranky. And it was very cold—like 40 degrees. We had to shoot it in 28 days, and sometimes we’d do as many as 30 setups in one night. So we had a horrendous problem.” Lucas had originally asked Wexler to shoot the film, but Wexler did not want to work in wide-screen. However, the two cameramen Lucas hired could not find the visual style he wanted, and Wexler finally agreed to come to his aid. Lucas pays tribute to Wexler: “He’s really, in my estimation, the best cameraman in this country. Essentially he was working in a medium he hated—widescreen. He hated Techniscope because it’s very grainy and doesn’t look very good. I wanted the film to look sort of like a Sam Katzman beach-party movie, all yellow and red and orange. And Haskell figured out how to do it. He devised what he calls jukebox lighting. He has his own company in Los Angeles that shoots commercials, and he was working at the time. So he’d fly up here to San Francisco every night, shoot the picture all night, sleep on the plane down to Los Angeles, shoot all day on commercials, then fly back up here. He did that for almost five weeks. It was just an incredible gesture, and he did a fantastic job. The movie looked exactly the way I wanted it to look—very much like a carnival.”

Almost everyone grants the technical triumphs of *American Graffiti*—the achievements in cinematography, editing, and acting. But some critics protest what they think the film is saying. They interpret the movie as a simple celebration of the fifties, and they fear that because it is so popular, it may feed the indifference and complacency of a young audience eager to forget



Lucas at work

today's social problems. How does Lucas answer that charge? "Well, the main thing I would say is that there is going to be complacency whether I encourage it or not. That's because kids in the last ten years have been beating their heads against the wall, and their brains and their blood are all over the pavement."

Lucas also points out that the film is about moving forward, not backward: "The film is about change. It's about the change in rock and roll, it's about the change in a young person's life at 18 when he leaves home and goes off to college; and it's also about the cultural change that took place when the fifties turned into the sixties—when we went from a country of apathy and non-involvement to a country of radical

involvement. The film is saying that you have to go forward. You have to be Curt, you have to go into the sixties. The fifties can't live."

At the same time, Lucas admits that he is hoping to revive some of the values of the fifties: "Everybody looks at the fifties as complacent, but I look at the fifties as optimistic. Well, the film isn't really about the fifties anyway. It's about 1962. The Kennedy era is really when I grew up, and that was an era of optimism, not complacency. It was the era of Martin Luther King.

"I realized after *THX* that people don't care about how the country's being ruined. All that movie did was to make people more pessimistic, more depressed, and less willing to get involved in trying to make the world better. So I decided that this time I would make a more optimistic film that makes people feel positive about their fellow human beings. It's too easy to make films about Watergate. And it's hard to be optimistic when everything tells you to be pessimistic and cynical. I'm a very bad cynic. But we've got to regenerate optimism. Maybe kids will walk out of the film and for a second they'll feel, 'We could really make something out of this country, or we could really make something out of our lives.' It's all that hokey stuff about being a good neighbor, and the American spirit and all that crap. There *is* something in it."

Lucas's early success at accomplishing the goals he set for himself may explain his belief in the American ideals of optimism and initiative. "Now everybody says, 'The country's rotten. We've fought for change, but it doesn't work. It's hopeless.' Well, life isn't that way. It wasn't that way for *THX*, it wasn't that way for Curt Henderson, and it isn't that way for me. When they said I could never get into the film business, I said, 'Well, okay, but I'll try anyway.' Anybody who wants to do anything can do it. It's an old hokey American point of view, but I've sort of discovered that it's true."

Lucas hopes to do more experimental work in the future, but he is amused that many people think of him as an arty director. "Francis is really the arty director," he comments wryly. "He's the one who likes psychological motiva-



tions, Brecht and Albee and Tennessee Williams. I'm more drawn to Flash Gordon. I like action adventure, chases, things blowing up, and I have strong feelings about science fiction and comic books and that sort of world." It is the process of making films that thrills him most: "Some of my friends are more concerned about art and being considered a Fellini or an Orson Welles, but I've never really had that problem. I just like making movies. I was at a film conference with George Cukor, and he detested the fact that everyone called us film-makers. He said, 'I'm not a film-maker. A film-maker is like a toy-maker, and I'm a director.' Well, I'm a film-maker. I'm very much akin to a toy-maker. If I wasn't a film-maker, I'd probably be a toy-maker. I like to make things move, and I like to make them myself. Just give me the tools and I'll make the toys. I can sit forever doodling on my movie. I don't think that much about whether it's going to be a great movie or a terrible movie, or whether it's going to be a piece of art or a piece of shit. I never thought of *Graffiti* as a really great movie. I thought of it as a goofy, fun movie."

Despite his disclaimers, Lucas has the most important characteristic of an artist: integrity. He makes movies on his own terms, and fights any kind of interference. On both *THX* and *American Graffiti*, a few minutes were cut by the studio, and Lucas felt the cuts—relatively minor though they were—as a painful violation of his vision. "There was no reason for the cutting," he declares. "It was just arbitrary. You do a film like *American Graffiti* or *THX*—it takes two years of your life, you get paid hardly anything at all, and you sweat blood. You write it, you slave over it, you stay up 28 nights getting cold and sick. Then you put it together, and you've lived with it. It's exactly like raising a kid. You raise a kid for two or three years, you struggle with it, then somebody comes along and says, 'Well, it's a very nice kid, but I think we ought to cut off one of its fingers.' So they take their little axe and chop off one of the fingers. They say, 'Don't worry. Nobody will notice. She'll live, everything will be all right.' But I mean, it *hurts* a great deal."

Even though Lucas has now had a major success, he anticipates more of the same battles with studios, adding, "Every time you have a successful film, you do get a few more things in your contract. The film I'm writing now, *The Star Wars*, has been turned down by a couple of studios already, but now we're finally getting a deal because they say, 'Oh, he's had a hit movie. We don't really know about the idea, but he's a hot director, so let's do it.' They don't do it on the basis of the material; they do it on the kind of deal they can make, because most of the people at the studios are former agents, and all they know are deals. They're like used-car dealers."

His next two projects are more obviously "commercial" projects than his first two films. He describes *The Star Wars* as "a space opera in the tradition of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. It's James Bond and *2001* combined—super fantasy, capes and swords and laser guns and spaceships shooting each other, and all that sort of stuff. But it's not camp. It's meant to be an exciting action adventure film."

After *Star Wars* he wants to try a slapstick comedy—"Woody Allen, Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton all rolled into one. It's been a long time since anybody made a really goofy comedy that had people rolling in the aisles. It's very hard to do, which is why nobody does it, but it's a challenge; it's like climbing that mountain."

While hoping that a couple of strong commercial successes will give him more options in the future, Lucas does not feel he is compromising in making more straightforward entertainment movies. He is honestly drawn to the pop-kitsch world of space comics and slapstick comedy. His intensity and his bold visual flair are sure to give an emotional charge to any project he tackles. George Lucas's movies begin with images: "I always see images flash into my head, and I just have to make those scenes. I have an overwhelming drive to get that great shot of the two spaceships, one firing at the other as they dive through the space fortress. By God I want to see it. That image is in my head, and I won't rest until I see it on the screen."